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# Attack Said to Push Contras From Area of Nicaragua Where They Operated Openly

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua, May 22 — Insurgents backed by the United States have been pushed from a part of northern Nicaragua where they were openly operating, according to diplomats and military officers.

The Government and the rebels, known as the contras, both claimed victory after what was apparently the largest combat operation of the six-year-old insurgency.

In February, the contras established a forward base in the northern part of Jinotega Province, a lightly populated area. In the following months, contra officers led by Mike Lima, one of their top commanders, helped guide thousands of soldiers from bases in Honduras to positions inside Nicaragua.

Foreign journalists were escorted through the area by contras seeking to prove they could move freely there.

In a speech on April 25, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega Saavedra announced that Government forces were "developing an important operation" in the area. Two weeks later, on May 10, the attack began, officials said. After more than 24 hours of combat, Sandinista forces overran contra positions near the confluence of the Amaka and Bocay Rivers.

Mr. Ortega said the army had used 36 helicopters and 3,000 soldiers in the attack. He described it as the largest operation ever conducted by Sandinista forces.

Intelligence reports from Honduras suggest that about 800 contras fled the Sandinista advance and returned to sanctuaries in Honduras. But spokesmen for the contras said their forces had simply moved to nearby parts of

Nicaragua.

The number of contras killed in the operation was 4, according to the contras, or 54, according to the Government. The Government said it lost 8 soldiers, but the contras estimated that they had killed 40.

Four of the Sandinista dead, Government officials said, were aboard a helicopter that was shot down by an American-made Redeye missile. It was the first time the Government had admitted losing a copter to hostile fire.

## 2 Copters Reported Lost

Today, diplomats said the Nicaraguan Air Force had actually lost two helicopters in the Jinotega operation. Military officers identified the craft as Soviet-made Mi-17 transport copters.

The Defense Ministry has declined to comment on claims by the contras that the dead helicopter pilot, identified as

Jorge Neil Crisanto O'Brien, was Cuban-born.

In a telephone interview from Miami, a spokeswoman for the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest contra group, said the contras had never intended to establish a permanent presence in northern Jinotega.

## No Clear-Cut Victory Seen

"We don't consider this to have been a defeat at all, but rather a strategic victory," said the spokeswoman, Marta Sacasa. "We attracted a large number of troops to an area where they now have to be supplied by air or moved out. Our force was much smaller and not as well armed."

"The important thing is not to hold fixed positions, but to dominate the zone, which we do," Mrs. Sacasa said.

After the attack, the Government brought six helicopters full of journal-

ists to the site of the base, which some had earlier visited as guests of the contras. The army regional commander, Lieut. Col. Manuel Salvatierra, said that the area was under the Government's "absolute control" and that contras were now operating there only in small groups.

Diplomats and other foreigners in Managua said the operation was not a clear-cut victory for either side.

"For the time being at least, the contras can no longer say to the Hondurans and the Americans and the world that they have a command post inside Nicaragua," one ambassador said.

But a military officer who closely followed the Jinotega operation said there were few contras left in the area when the Sandinistas attacked, in part because they were forewarned by the Defense Minister's announcement that an attack was imminent.